The Cleveland Museum of Art

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Contact: Greg Donley, 216/421–7340, ext. 263

KENRO IZU'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF CAMBODIA'S ANGKOR MONUMENTS IN NEW EXHIBITION AT THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

"The superlative 'exquisite' may be overused and misused, but it's the only fit word to describe Izu's photographs."

—*The New Yorker,* February 17, 1997

(Cleveland, OH) A new exhibition, **Kenro Izu Photographs: Light Over Ancient Angkor,** is on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from April 5 through June 5, 1997, in gallery 105. The photographer's subject is a group of monumental stone temples that were built in the jungle of northwestern Cambodia between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. About twenty platinum/palladium prints comprise the exhibition, which represents the first time Kenro Izu's work has been exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Admission to the museum and to this exhibition is free.

Izu, a Japanese-born photographer who resides in New York City, spends the majority of his time doing commercial still-life work (specializing in jewelry) used in catalogues and advertising. While his commercial work has earned him a reputation as a master of lighting and design, his fine art photography—specifically of stone monuments around the world—has been his passion since the late 1970s. Previous photographic projects have taken him to Egypt, England, Scotland, France, Mexico, and Easter Island off the coast of Chile, always in search of what he terms "the spirituality that I feel in stone remains and the density of atmosphere that embraces them." In 1993 he made his first trip to Angkor and immediately felt a profound sense of tranquility that seemed at odds with the contradictions of the place, where the massive architectural creations of a millennium ago have been inhabited by the jungle. Giant, sinuous trees grow right up through the ancient stone walls and clinging vines drape the carved faces of human figures. The most famous of the ruins of Angkor is the spectacular five-towered temple of Angkor Wat, but the entire area of the ruins—including temples, terraces, and other structures as well as canals, moats, reservoirs, and thousands of sculptures—is much more extensive, encompassing some 180 square kilometers (nearly 80 square miles) of dense jungle. Izu has made his photographs in sites all over this area, over the course of his first five visits (he plans to continue to go there).

The task of venturing five times into a war-torn foreign country in order to take pictures in a remote jungle location was made somewhat more challenging by Izu's chosen equipment: close to 200 pounds of camera and accessories. In his quest to render his subjects, Izu came to the conclusion in

11150 EAST BOULEVARD, CLEVELAND, OHIO 44106-1797
TEL 216-421-7340 TDD 216-421-0018 FAX 216-421-0411

1983 that the only printing method that did justice to "the density of atmosphere" that he perceives surrounding ancient monuments was contact printing, in which the negative is placed directly onto the paper to create a positive image on paper that is the same size as the negative. In order to get a large, exhibition-size print, one therefore needs a large negative. In order to get a large negative, one needs a large camera. So, in 1983, Izu commissioned the Deardorff company, fabled manufacturers of large-format view cameras, to build for him the largest portable camera they could make. Deardorff produced for him a camera that makes a massive 14 by 20 inch negative, which he has used for his noncommercial projects ever since.

Contact prints of this size are rare today (though they were not uncommon among landscape photographers in the late 19th century) and equally unusual is Izu's printing method: the laborious, tricky, and expensive platinum/palladium process. To make each print, he applies exacting portions of ferric oxillate, potassium chloride, and a solution made up of platinum and palladium to specially-treated watercolor paper using custom-made non-metallic brushes; then he dries the sheet with a hair dryer, places the negative on the paper, flattens the two together with a sheet of glass, and turns on a mercury vapor light to make an exposure of between 25 and 50 minutes. The exposed print is then processed in a series of chemical baths and washes. "On an average day," he told *Photo District News,* "if I work 12 to 14 hours, I can expose and develop 10 to 12 prints." Since he typically makes 10 or 15 prints to get one he likes, the museum is especially appreciative that Mr. Izu printed-to-order a number of the photographs on view here.

The reason some photographers are willing to invest such time and expense into this arduous process becomes obvious when one sees in person prints such as Izu's (Izu was inspired to learn the method after seeing a single Paul Strand platinum/palladium print at auction in 1981). Fine platinum/palladium prints have a rich brownish-red tone, with deep, warm blacks and almost infinitely subtle tonal variations throughout the ranges between shadows and highlights. They do have one practical advantage, which is unsurpassed archival permanence, as the platinum-based emulsion is extremely stable chemically. After years of trial- and-error refinement of his working method, Izu has earned a reputation among fine art photographers as a peerless master of the platinum/palladium technique.

The result of all this laborious effort—both in the jungle and in the darkroom—is a body of photographs that the museum's curator of contemporary art and photography Tom Hinson (who organized the exhibition) calls "a spectacularly successful presentation of the awesome physical achievement of historic Cambodian culture, a stellar artistic achievement on the part of the photographer."

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Izu's trips to Cambodia opened his eyes not only to the power of the ancient monuments, but to the plight of present-day Cambodians. Since the 1940s, an estimated eight million land mines have been planted in Cambodia, and nearly every day, one of these explodes. Among the frequent victims are innocent children. Moved by the sight of so many disfigured children, Izu decided to found *Friends Without a Border,* a non-profit foundation whose purpose is to raise funds to build the Angkor Clinic for Children. He is donating all proceeds from the sale of his Angkor work (through his representatives, the Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York) to this cause. For information about *Friends Without a Border,* call 212/254–1002.

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